DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 051 753 HE 002 228

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TITLE	In Opposition to Conventional Grades.
PUB DATE	71
NOTE	8p.; Paper based on a presentation to a meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, N.Y., February, 1971
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Cluster Colleges, Credit No Credit Grading, Evaluation, *Grades (Scholastic), Grading, *Higher Education, *Pass Fail Grading, *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	*Scripps College

ABSTRACT

Grades and other record evaluations should serve at least three functions: (1) they should communicate to the student how well and in what ways expected academic competencies and skills are being developed; (2) they are to be used within the college for advisory purposes, for granting admission to certain courses and programs, and for decisions on enrollment and degree requirements; and (3) they are used by graduate and professional schools for admission purposes, state scholarship agencies, and potential employers. Because conventional grades do not serve these functions adequately, they rarely reflect the student's true potential or the student's real academic strength and weaknesses. Studies have also shown that there is no evidence that conventional grades are better predictors of future academic success than are nonconventional grades. The experience with nonconventional grading at Scripps College indicates that instructors' comments serve the educational purposes of the College better than the former conventional grading system. (AF)

ED051753

In Opposition to Conventional Grades[1.]

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Letter grades have been the conventional form of academic grading for a long time, and recently some colleges and universities, Scripps College among them, have been trying out other forms of grading. Scripps College is in the second year of a two year "experiment" with a system in which both descriptive comments and a notation of Unsatisfactory, Satisfactory, or Distinction are used. Throughout the semester faculty members are expected to provide students with comments concerning their academic progress and, at the end of the semester, a written comment and accompanying symbol (U, S, D) are sent to the student, to the student's adviser, and become part of the student's transcript.

Evaluation of student performance and maintaining academic records are characteristics which, in part, distinguish educational institutions from society's other kinds of institutions. Assuming that colleges and universities ought to evaluate students and to keep academic records of their progress[2.] we might ask what purposes are served by such evaluation and grading. Grades and other recorded evaluations serve an important function in communicating to a student how well and in what ways he or

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1. Based on the presentation for the symposium "College Grading Practices: What are the Questions and Where are the Answers?" at the American Educational Research Association meetings, New York City, 1971

2. Whether academic degrees ought to be granted at all, and if so, what different criteria of achievement might be used, are questions which could be debated, but which are beyond the scope of this paper.

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she is developing the academic competencies and skills which are expected in each course. Secondly, records of academic achievement are used within the college for advising purposes, for granting admission to certain courses and programs, for determining who may be allowed to remain enrolled, and for deciding who has met the degree requirements of the institution. Thirdly, academic records serve purposes beyond the college community; transcripts of a student's academic achievement may be made available to graduate or professional schools, state scholarship agencies, potential employers, or others who may request course-achievement data on which to base their decisions regarding a particular individual.

My objection to conventional grading is that it does not achieve very well the variety of purposes which evaluation and grading are expected to serve.

Informational Feedback

First, as informational feedback to the student traditional grades are not specific and differentiated enough; they lump together in the same category students who differ markedly in their academic skills and competencies. Rather than provide an analysis of a student's academic strengths and weaknesses, grades obscure important differences among students.

Grades are unidimensional: A, B, C, D, and F form a simple, ordinal scale. Academic growth, on the other hand, is multidimensional and complex. Thus grades tend to oversimplify the nature and complexity of academic learning. Grading a student in a course may be based upon attendance, originality of thought, breadth of information, ability to apply what has been learned, apparent interest in or commitment to the discipline, and other aspects of performance. Traditionally, these dissimilar dimensions are "averaged" into one composite grade. Even though a professor's analysis of a student's performance in a course may have been very com-

plex indeed, the student nevertheless receives one undifferentiated symbol as a result.

A letter grade is necessarily inexplicit about what standard or frame of reference was used by the professor in assigning the grade. Each dimension of academic performance may be evaluated on the basis of the level of achievement attained by the student, upon the improvement shown from the beginning to the end of the course, upon the effort apparently expended, or upon all three. If the development of standards for evaluating ones own performance is a proper goal of education, then the values assigned to various dimensions of academic performance ought to be made explicit.

Advising and Other Institutional Purposes for Grades

Perhaps it could be said that the meaning of a letter grade is irretrievably lost as soon as it is created and recorded by the professor. No one can recreate what dimensions, priorities, and values a professor had in mind when he assigned a given grade. Because of the ambiguity and inexplicitness of letter grades, student advisers are likely to be uninformed about the nature of a student's academic development in college.

The problems which characterize conventional grading in individual courses are compounded when grades in many diverse courses are combined into a grade point average (GPA). It is the lack of substantive meaning in conventional grades which gives them their capability of being converted into a single GPA. Yet, GPAs are widely used, and they are used as if they were reliable, objective, and meaningful. To base important institutional decisions simply upon grades and GPAs seems dubious for several reasons. The professor's analysis of a student's performance may be more pertinent to consider in making an individual decision than knowing what was the letter grade. We need more research data on this issue, but it does seem reasonable that qualitative differences among students

should be considered when decisions about individuals are made. Secondly, as Humphreys (1968) documents clearly, there is a good deal of instability in intellectual performance during the 4-year undergraduate period. Correlations reported between freshman and senior year GPAs are about .34 which, while not zero, are so low that "One simply cannot predict well enough from freshman academic deficiency to senior performance (Humphreys, 1968, p. 379)." Yet, college policies on academic dismissal are almost universally based on GPA.

For decisions made within a college, conventional grades and GPAs are unnecessary. A Pass/Fail system would be perfectly adequate for many decisions. For others, such as dismissal from college or admission to upper division courses or to special programs, descriptive comments or multidimensional rating scales (eg., Elbow, 1969: Troyer, 1970) would be more adequate and appropriate than letter grades. Depending upon the college's statement of educational objectives, either a record of demonstrated competencies or a record of the required number and kind of courses "passed" would be a sufficient basis for deciding who had met the college's degree requirements.

Purposes Outside the Institution

Colleges supply grading information to many agencies even though there is no clear evidence that GPAs are "valid" for many of the different purposes to which grades are put. Moreover, grades are used as the basis for some decisions for which other criteria ought to be used. Renewal of certain state scholarships, for instance, depends upon the student's maintaining a specified GPA; in my opinion this is an unsound educational policy. Scholarships should be granted on the basis of financial need to students who continue to meet the academic standards of the college in which they are enrolled.

Graduate and professional schools typically rely on grades in selecting students for admission although studies which have attempted to identify predictors of success in graduate school programs have found that undergraduate grades are not always reliable indicators of graduate school performance. In a review of many such studies Warren (1970) found that correlations reported between undergraduate and first year graduate school grades ranged from about -.20 to +.60, and the median correlation was about .30. Undergraduate grades generally do not correlate highly with academic performance in the later phases of graduate education, nor with other criteria of academic success such as actual completion of the graduate program (Hackman, Wiggins, & Bass, 1970; Bundy, 1968). Some studies have found that grades are no better than letters of recommendation or scores on standardized tests, such as the Graduate Record Examination (G R E) or the Law School Admission Test (L S A T), in predicting the liklihood of success in a graduate program (Mehrabian, 1969; Lunneborg & Lunneborg, 1966). While conventional GPAs are a means of making admissions decisions from among large numbers of qualified applicants, efficiency of prediction is unlikely to be improved by using conventional grades, once standardized test scores and faculty recommendations have been considered.

There is no evidence that conventional grades are better predictors than are non-conventional grades, nor that students educated under a non-conventional grading system are less likely to be successful in graduate school than are students who have been graded conventionally. If graduate departments and schools would investigate what specific dimensions of academic performance or combinations of qualities were related to success in their program, prediction could be improved and selection could be based explicitly on the most relevant criteria.

Grades are a questionable basis for employee selection, too. The components of grades and of job performance which are common to each other are typically unknown and untested by those who use grades as selection criteria. Recognizing that grades are poor predictors of job success, some companies are developing their own tests to be used for selection. This is probably a good step. If outside agencies do not request conventional grades, perhaps colleges will feel freer to examine and to change their grading procedures if they find this desirable on educational grounds.

EVALUATION AND GRADING AT SCRIPPS

Scripps College initiated the Comment System for many different reasons. Some reasons had to do with expectations about possible effects of this change upon styles of teaching and others had to do with presumptions about the way it would affect the quality of student motivation and learning. Although there was not much research evidence to serve as a guide, it was believed that comments, though time-consuming to write, might serve the educational purposes of the college better than the former conventional grading system. Certainly comments have the potentiality for greater communication of educationally relevant information.

The faculty vote on the new system of grading came at a time in the history of the college when some degree requirements (i.e., language and science) were being stated in terms of competencies rather than in semesters of time enrolled. A majority of the faculty voted to adopt for a two year trial period, a comment system in which students were to be evaluated relative to stated, varied goals of a course, rather than on a single scale relative to others in the class.

Comments can be more explicit in describing a student's academic performance than grades can be. Comments also indicate the frame of reference of the profrssor in making the evaluation, and can more accurately convey what the professor had in mind when he made the judgment. The accompanying symbol, in addition, indicates whether or not credit toward the degree is to be granted for the course work, without making gratuitous quantitative differentiations (like B- or C+) which too often reflect transitory and trivial, if not meaningless differences among students.

While other aspects of the comment system are yet to be evaluated, a survey of student opinion made last year showed that student attitude was predominantly favorable toward the new system of evaluation. Of 386 Scripps students who participated in the survey, 91% believed that the new system of evaluation had many good points; 95% indicated that they liked to receive written evaluations. Given the general level of student dissatisfaction with higher educational practices today, and given the fact that evaluation and grading have typically been viewed as necessary evils, the favorability expressed by these students seems particularly noteworthy.

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